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CHINA- SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

FROM LOW PRIORITY TO HIGH TENSIONS

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For most of the first four months of 2020, China's generally low priority treatment of Southeast Asia featured cooperation on the coronavirus, standard treatment of South China Sea issues, and a visit by Xi Jinping to Myanmar. However, April saw tensions rise in the South China Sea, with an increase in US criticism of Chinese actions and US military moves against Chinese challenges as well as Chinese initiatives and ongoing provocations.

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As top Chinese leaders contained COVID-19 at home, restarted the economy, and sought global prominence in fighting the epidemic, they generally devoted secondary attention to relations with Southeast Asia. The cancelled Boao Forum for Asia and the National People's Congress precluded the usual authoritative Chinese leaders' statements on regional developments in these venues. For the most part, Southeast Asian countries received unexceptional coverage in Chinese publicity, which thanked foreign countries for their support for China and highlighted Chinese support for foreign countries. An exception was Cambodia and the extraordinary visit of Hun Sen to China and his meeting with Xi Jinping at the height of the health crisis in China in early February. Meanwhile, Xi's visit to Myanmar in January stood out as the last act of normal high-level diplomacy in the region.

China's low prioritization of the region showed when Foreign Minister Wang Yi, despite the pandemic, traveled to Europe to give a lengthy [speech](#) on China's view of the world at the Munich Security Conference in mid-February. Only one sentence of the address dealt with Southeast Asia, reiterating China's commitment to the proposed code of conduct and the settlement of South China Sea disputes through dialogue and negotiations by the relevant parties. In an interview in Berlin during that trip, Wang gave a long indictment of US coercive pressures against China, noting in passing US naval and air exercises along China's maritime border.

Cooperating against the Coronavirus

Wang took a leadership role at the special China-ASEAN foreign ministers meeting on the novel coronavirus in Laos on February 20. He called for a special China-ASEAN leaders meeting to plan and guide cooperation at a higher level, noting that such a conference took place in 2003 in response to the SARS epidemic. The publicity surrounding the meeting included an ASEAN chairman's statement expressing support for China's efforts to fight the virus. The weeks prior to the meeting saw reported donations of supplies to China to fight the virus from several Southeast Asian countries. Earlier in February, China participated in a meeting on dealing with the epidemic led by public health ministers from ASEAN Plus Three—the 10 ASEAN members along with China, Japan, and South Korea—countries. On April 7, another

special meeting of the APT health ministers issued a statement during their videoconference to coordinate efforts to combat the virus.

Premier Li Keqiang participated in an April 14 special summit via videoconference of the ASEAN Plus 3 underlining close coordination and cooperation in dealing with COVID-19. Regarding Chinese assistance to ASEAN countries, Li said China will provide another 100 million face masks, 10 million protective suits, and other urgently needed medical supplies as grant assistance and via commercial channels. He added that China supports ASEAN in setting up a COVID-19 ASEAN response fund, and will provide necessary support through an ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund and APT Cooperation Fund.

Official Chinese media showed Xi, along with Li, making phone calls to a large number of world leaders concerning the coronavirus, and Xi participating in the videoconference G20 Extraordinary Leaders Summit on March 26. China's attention to Southeast Asian countries in these reports was generally low-key and unexceptional. By contrast, Hun Sen insured that Cambodia received special Chinese treatment by [visiting](#) a grateful Xi in Beijing on February 5, showing support for China at a time of need due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Subsequent Chinese media coverage and aid efforts gave top priority to Cambodia. With the dispatch of a special team of Chinese medical experts to Cambodia in late March, the country was highlighted as the first in the region to receive such support.



Figure 1 Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen meets Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping in Beijing. Photo: China Daily News

In addition to fighting the epidemic, common themes of official Chinese commentary about Southeast Asia and the virus included the need to coordinate to resume economic activity and mutually beneficial trade and manufacturing, as well as revive production chains linking the countries. It also strongly supported the leadership of the World Health Organization in combating the epidemic and highlighted anti-Asian racism prompted by the virus in the United States.

Amid the pandemic, it appeared that China's public health diplomacy was yielding some dividends in the region. In an [opinion piece](#), Thai scholar and expert on Southeast Asian politics Thitinan Pongsudhirak argued that a number of Southeast Asian countries, especially those most dependent on China for trade and aid, including Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, were minimizing their criticism of China. He said, "even if their nationals face more ravages from the virus, their governments will want to be seen as suffering with, not against, China." Southeast Asian countries affected by the pandemic were seeing and projecting signs of a regional recession and thus keen to reopen their borders and ease travel restrictions, all the while maintaining solidarity with China to respond to the coronavirus outbreak.

South China Sea disputes: Rising Tensions, Relevant Context

Rising Tensions

April saw an escalation of tensions over the South China Sea, pitting the United States against China. First, Vietnam on April 3 issued a formal protest, accusing a Chinese Coast Guard ship on April 2 of pursuing, hitting, and sinking a Vietnamese fishing boat off the Paracel Islands and detaining the crew. The Chinese version of the incident insisted that the Vietnamese boat rammed into the Coast Guard ship after being warned to stop its illegal fishing and leave the area. On April 8, the Philippine foreign ministry expressed "deep concern" over the collision, recalling the Chinese sinking of a Philippines fishing boat last year. The US State Department issued a press statement on April 6 siding with the Vietnamese and expressing serious concern over the sinking and what it called a long string of Chinese actions to assert unlawful maritime claims disadvantaging Southeast Asian neighbors. The State Department also took issue

with China recently establishing two new "research stations" on land features in the outposts it built on Fiery Cross Reef and Subi Reef, as well as special military aircraft landings on Fiery Cross Reef. It highlighted China taking advantage of international preoccupation with the coronavirus to build facilities and advance control in the disputed South China Sea. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson rejected the US statement and the linkage of South China Sea issues with the fight against the coronavirus. South China Sea disputes were not mentioned in Chinese reports that, on the afternoon of April 2, Prime Minister Li took a call from the Vietnamese prime minister in which the virus, Vietnam's chairmanship of ASEAN, and China-Vietnam and China-ASEAN relations were discussed.

China's practice in recent years, of [harassing](#) other South China Sea claimants' efforts to explore for oil and gas in areas falling within China's expansive South China Sea claims, centered in recent months on the operations of a Malaysian survey ship. Following a pattern used last year to intimidate Vietnamese-directed explorations, Beijing deployed a large Chinese survey ship backed by escorting Chinese Coast Guard vessels to run in parallel with the Malaysian survey ship beginning in mid-April. The Malaysian Navy at times deployed a warship to monitor the intimidating Chinese Coast Guard ships and China reportedly deployed a destroyer as well. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman rebutted initial US criticism of the move and the State Department followed with a focused criticism after the Chinese survey ship's arrival near the Malaysian survey ship. On April 20, a Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman's statement criticized a US Defense Department statement on Chinese involvement in the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing boat to warn against US efforts to create an excuse for military involvement in South China Sea disputes.



Figure 2 A CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter takes off from the amphibious warfare ship, USS America (LHA-6). Photo: USNI News

More importantly, on April 20 US and foreign media reports said that a large US amphibious warfare ship (weighing 45,000 tons) and an accompanying US cruiser were moving in the South China Sea toward the location of the Malaysian-Chinese faceoff. The US Navy group soon added a US destroyer and a warship from Australia in a show of force. Initial reaction by the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman on April 21 was carefully measured and moderate, claiming to not know the US warships' movements. He [insisted](#) the Chinese survey ship acted appropriately and there was no "stand-off" with Malaysia, and advised that the situation in the South China Sea is "steadily improving." Beijing also had no immediate harsh reaction to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's sharp criticism of Chinese bullying in the South China Sea and Pompeo's strong affirmations of US resolve to counter it—including his reference to recent US military flight operations in the South China Sea—prior to the secretary's meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers on April 22.

In a report on April 30, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) reported information it had detailing movements of the US ships; they reportedly were 50 miles from the drilling ships on April 21; their location after that was not specified in the AMTI report. AMTI did note that another US warship, a littoral combat ship, left Singapore on April 25 and passed close to the Chinese survey vessel on April 26. When the US destroyer among the four ships deployed to the South China Sea conducted a freedom of navigation operations near the Paracel Islands on April 28, the usual criticism by the spokesperson of the PLA's Southern Command followed. The US cruiser in the group of four ships carried out a freedom of navigation

operations exercise in the Spratly Islands on April 29. The Southern Command's spokesperson's usual criticism again followed. In addition, the spokesman of China's Defense Ministry spokesman in the regular monthly press conference on April 30 strongly criticized the two freedom of navigation operations and the US-Australian joint navy exercise. *USNI News* reported on April 29 that the destroyer and cruiser along with the large US amphibious warfare ship "had been operating off the coast of Malaysia near an ongoing dispute over mineral exploration between Malaysia and China earlier this month," thereby suggesting that US operations near Malaysia were concluded.

Meanwhile, Beijing advanced administrative control of its expansive holdings in the South China Sea with the [announcement](#) on April 18 that China's State Council had approved the establishment of two districts, below the current administrative unit, Sansha City -- one to deal with matters including the Paracel Islands, and one to deal with matters including the Spratly Islands. The move prompted protests from Vietnam and the Philippines. Additionally, on April 20, China's Natural Resources Ministry and Civil Affairs Ministry released a joint statement giving names to features in the Paracel and Spratly islands. These included what were said to be 25 islands, shoals, and reefs and 55 oceanic mountains and ridges. The last such exercise was carried out in 1983, when China named 287 features in the area.

Targeting challenges from Vietnam, Yan Yan, director of the Research Centre of Oceans Law and Policy in the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, [said](#) China took this action to assert its sovereign rights because "China is faced with an increasingly aggressive Vietnam as the country continues to fish illegally and conduct oil and gas exploration unilaterally in the South China Sea." In a related move, China's foreign ministry spokesman on April 21 said that China's Mission at the United Nations on April 17 sent a diplomatic note to the UN General Secretary opposing several diplomatic notes sent to the UN General Secretary by the Vietnamese mission since late March affirming Vietnam's claims in the South China Sea.

Relevant Context

The rising tensions in April came against the background of disputes noted below reflecting

continuity in China's determined efforts to slowly, but surely, counter challenges and weaken opposition to its South China Sea ambitions. Disputes ranged from Chinese complaints against US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) challenging Beijing's contested South China Sea holdings to diplomatic and military moves by other claimants to assert their claims against China.

US FONOPS and US, China Military Exercises

A US Littoral Combat Ship challenged Chinese claims as it passed near Chinese held Johnson Reef and Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands in January, and a US destroyer challenged Chinese claims as it passed near the Chinese held Paracel Islands in March. Both prompted the usual complaints from PLA Southern Theater Command. *The South China Morning Post* [reported](#) that US FONOPS in the South China Sea occurred nine times in 2019, an increase over the five in 2018, and six in 2017. Earlier numbers were three in 2016, two in 2015, and none in 2014. The Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman on March 26 rebuked the FONOPS in March, along with the large US exercises that month carried out in the South China Sea by the *Theodore Roosevelt* Carrier Strike Group and the America Expeditionary Strike Group, plus exercises by US B-52 bombers and other aircraft operating in Chinese-claimed South China Sea airspace. China for its part held small anti-submarine exercises in March and a large aircraft carrier task group exercise in April.

Harassing Malaysian Oil and Gas Operations

The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) in February 2020 recalled Beijing's use in 2019 of coast guard vessels and maritime militia in protracted harassment and intimidation of Malaysian and Vietnamese oil and gas enterprise activities seen to infringe on Beijing's wide-ranging claims in the South China Sea as background for its [report](#) on another ongoing protracted standoff in the disputed South China Sea. The standoff this year involved Malaysian exploration for oil and gas, sometimes with the protection of a Malaysian warship, and what was depicted as ongoing harassment by Chinese Coast Guard vessels. Vietnam also claims the area and was seen to have deployed some maritime militia ships to monitor developments. As noted above, AMTI provided an updated report on the situation on April 30, noting the coming and going of the US Navy group sent to the area early in the month,

along with the continued presence of the Malaysian survey ship and a nearby Malaysian warship and a nearby Chinese survey ship accompanied by Chinese Coast Guard and Maritime Militia fishing boats.

Malaysia, China, Philippines, and Vietnam: Affirming South China Sea Claims

The Thayer Consultancy Background Briefs clarified the meaning and significance of Malaysia's new submission on its South China Sea claims on December 12, 2019 to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS). As noted in the [previous Comparative Connections](#), that submission was accompanied by the Malaysian foreign minister labeling China's nine-dash line territorial claim as "ridiculous." Subsequent developments included the following:

- Malaysia's submission precipitated a response by China on the same day. In a diplomatic note to the commission, China reiterated its longstanding claim to the South China Sea and all its land features. China also called on the CLCS not to consider the submission by Malaysia.
- The Philippines responded to the submissions by China and Malaysia with two separate diplomatic notes both dated March 6, 2020. The Philippines relied on the ruling of the UNCLOS Arbitral Tribunal of July 12, 2016 to argue that China's claims were illegal under international law. This Philippine assertion represented a marked change in the Philippines' public position since President Rodrigo Duterte set aside the tribunal ruling to improve relations with China.
- This chain of diplomatic notes to the CLCS set the stage for Vietnam to join other claimant states in protesting a Chinese note reiterating its claim on March 23, 2020 with a Vietnamese diplomatic note on March 30.

The Thayer consultancy advised that the CLCS has no authority to consider or resolve disputes between states over the outer limits of the continental shelf. Such disputes must be resolved between the states concerned. And it noted that Malaysia's submission in December

left the door open for talks with the Philippines and Vietnam to agree to delimit overlapping areas of their proposed extended continental shelves. As noted below, there was some speculation that Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam could make a tripartite submission in the future.

Indonesia Counters Chinese Challenges—Prospects for United Resistance, Conflict

Indonesia protested strongly the perceived intrusion of over 60 Chinese fishing boats accompanied by two Chinese Coast Guard vessels into its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone in late December. Indonesia followed in early January by sending warships and jet fighters to patrol the waters concurrent with President Joko Widodo's visit to the area affirming Indonesia's claim. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman on January 6 called on both sides to manage their differences and maintain regional peace, while he affirmed that China's sovereignty over the Spratly Islands in the southern South China Sea and implied such sovereignty justified Chinese fishing in "nearby waters." The Indonesian military told the media on January 9 that the offending Chinese Coast Guard and fishing vessels had left the disputed areas. However, later media reports including a *New York Times* feature article, [said](#) the offending Chinese ships soon returned and stayed for days before leaving. *The Times* report portrayed the Indonesian government as reluctant to confront China over the issue, fearing loss of economic benefits from China.

The at least initially strong Indonesian reaction in January and diplomatic steps to counter China's claims by Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, reviewed above, prompted [forecasts](#) of a possible united front against China's territorial ambitions on the part of impacted Southeast Asian states. A [counterargument](#) held that all these states sought to benefit from economic interchange with China and were reluctant to risk confrontation with the powerful Chinese security forces.

Meanwhile, China's prominent South China Sea expert Shicun Wu [argued that](#) the overall South China Sea situation was volatile and potentially dangerous. While he blamed the United States for efforts to "contain" China in the South China Sea, he averred that "unilateral actions by claimants will continue to be a major factor leading to instability." Singapore's Collin Koh

[forecast](#) that the Chinese South China Sea disputes with Vietnam, Malaysia, and the United States head the list of reasons why "there is little to be sanguine about" regarding stability in the South China Sea. For their part, US analysts Bonnie Glaser and Jeff Benson [highlighted the risk](#) of a military incident caused by China's lax adherence to rules on avoiding collisions at sea.

Xi Jinping visits Myanmar

Xi Jinping's January 17–18 [visit to Myanmar](#) was the first by a Chinese president in 19 years. It also was the Chinese leader's first trip abroad in 2020. Given the massive impact of the coronavirus and the abrupt halt of China's economic growth, the visit seemed likely to be the last conducted with normal Chinese publicity for some time. Xi met with Aung San Suu Kyi and with the commander in chief of the politically powerful armed forces. Signed agreements involved finalizing building a deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in Rakhine state and planning for other elements along the so-called China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, an important component of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Nearly a third of Myanmar's foreign trade is with China and was valued at over \$15 billion for 2019. China was the country's largest foreign investor, with annual investments of close to \$5 billion in 2018 and 2019. China is Myanmar's most important international supporter in the face of sharp criticism from western countries about its cruel oppression driving hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya out of the country and into massive refugee camps in Bangladesh. Beijing also has important influence with the Wa state army and other militant groups along the China-Myanmar border and sometimes plays the role of mediator between the groups and the Myanmar government. Against this background, Xi and the Myanmar leaders emphasized the positive and sidestepped continued mutual wariness caused by differences over how to settle issues involving the armed groups along the China border, the continued halt on work on the controversial Myitsone dam since 2011, and the viability of other largescale Chinese infrastructure projects in the country.

China and Mekong Drought

Wang Yi's trip to Vientiane, Laos for the China-ASEAN foreign ministers meeting on the coronavirus on February 20 also involved his leadership role in the Fifth Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in the Laotian capital. His remarks to the group gave top priority to encouraging mutual efforts to support China's drive to promote smoother trade, infrastructure connectivity, and economic development in the Mekong region, part of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, one of several corridors in China's ambitious BRI. His second priority was working together to combat the coronavirus. The third was dealing with recent drought in the Lancang-Mekong region.

Extensive Chinese dam building on the long upper Mekong River, known as the Lancang River in China, gave China control of how much water and how fast the river flows to down river countries. Control of river flow has become an unconventional but nonetheless important source of recent Chinese influence on down-river countries: Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Those countries depend on the water flows for hydroelectric power, fishing, and agriculture. This control was particularly important during recurring periods of drought in recent years. Though different regional groupings discussed mutual use of the river, Beijing was careful to remain in control of the flow of the river waters. The Lancang-Mekong Cooperation group does not have the power to compel China to share the river water. Recent drought has been very hard on the downstream countries.

Though China argues that it too suffers from drought, *The New York Times* [cited](#) a study that showed China's Lancang River watershed receiving good annual rainfall during the past year, filling capacity behind its dams, whereas the lower river Mekong suffered drought. The study argued that China's reservoirs were full and could provide a lot more water downstream but for various reasons Beijing has done little to ease the water shortage on the Mekong. The down-river countries have little recourse and are reluctant to risk China's ire and a possible continued cutoff of water. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesman on April 21 labeled *The Times* report as "groundless."

It has been recently [reported](#) that Thailand would no longer participate in the Lancang-Mekong Navigation Channel Improvement Project, a Chinese-led development plan that would dredge and open up a key part of the Mekong River as a regional river trade link. The Thai government initially cited the lack of sufficient funding for the project, but environmental groups have also lauded the effectiveness of their pressure on the Thai government to withdraw from the project over the environmental impact and concerns.

Outlook

The sharp rise in US-China tensions over the South China Sea complicates Chinese and regional calculations on how to deal with China's rise and related regional concerns. It adds to uncertainty as to whether China's regional influence in 2020 will be accompanied by regional support, acquiescence, or resistance. An authoritative [annual survey](#) of elite opinion in Southeast Asia released in January found that a large majority viewed China as the region's most influential economic power and a narrow majority judged that China was the most influential political and strategic power in Southeast Asia, followed by the United States as a distant second. But 85% who viewed China as most influential were concerned about this influence. And over 60% of those polled had little or no confidence that China would "do the right thing" to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance. In sum, Chinese behavior led to a big increase in both the perception of Chinese relative influence and a big increase in Southeast Asian elite's distrust of China, suggesting serious obstacles impede China's ascendance. Increased friction with the United States exacerbates those obstacles.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2020

Jan. 3, 2020: China and Indonesia [become embroiled](#) in a diplomatic dispute following Chinese coast guard vessels' activities in the Natuna islands, an area that is part of Indonesia's exclusive economic zone. Indonesia summoned the Chinese ambassador to lodge a formal protest while the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson asserted China's longstanding rights and interests in the contested waters.

Jan. 7, 2020: Chinese President Xi Jinping meets visiting Laotian Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith in Beijing. The two sides pledge to deepen bilateral infrastructure and economic cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Jan. 17-18, 2020: Chinese President Xi [visits Myanmar](#) and meets senior Myanmar leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi. China signs a total of 33 agreements and memorandums of understanding to enhance bilateral investment cooperation, including development of a deep-sea port in the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone in western Myanmar.

Jan. 18, 2020: Foreign ministers from ASEAN [meet in Vietnam](#) to discuss the latest developments in the South China Sea. The regional diplomats underscored collective concerns over land reclamations and other activities that are affecting regional stability, but they remain encouraged by the progress of substantive negotiations over the early conclusion of an "effective and substantive Code of Conduct (COC) that is consistent with international law."

Jan. 19-31, 2020: According to a report issued by the South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative, a research unit at Peking University, at least 34 Vietnamese trawlers, some of which are armed with maritime militia, enter and are active in China's territorial sea in Hainan island. China maintains a major naval and air force base in Hainan island.

Feb. 5, 2020: Chinese President Xi [meets](#) visiting Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in Beijing. The two leaders pledge closer bilateral support to curb the coronavirus outbreak.

Feb. 6, 2020: Thailand announces it would no longer participate in a Chinese-led development plan that would dredge and open up a key part of the Mekong River as a regional river trade link connecting China's Yunnan province with parts of Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. There are increasing concerns over the environmental impact such a large-scale project would have on the ecosystem, especially on decreasing fish stock, sediment flow, and further exacerbation of droughts and floods caused by upstream dams and dredging activities along the Mekong River.

Feb. 20, 2020: Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi [meets](#) Southeast Asian counterparts in Vientiane for the "Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Coronavirus Disease." The multilateral forum discusses collective measures to help combat the epidemic and closer coordination between regional public health officials.

Feb. 27-28, 2020: Border management authorities from China and Vietnam patrol their joint border in the Lao Cai area to strengthen security at points of entry amid the coronavirus outbreak. The two forces agree to take turns leading joint patrol efforts once a month to prevent illegal border crossings and to increase information campaigns targeting border residents to prevent the spread of community transmission of the coronavirus.

March 15, 2020: China and Cambodia [carry out](#) the "Dragon Gold 2020" exercise, the fourth joint counterterrorism and humanitarian rescue drill. The exercise began in 2016 as part of an effort to deepen bilateral military and security cooperation.

March 20, 2020: Beijing installs two new facilities in the Fiery Cross and Subi Reef to support the research of oceanographers and marine scientists.

April 2, 2020: A Chinese coast guard ship and a Vietnamese fishing vessel [collide](#) near the Paracel Islands, raising tension between the two countries as each side lays blame on the other for the incident. China and Vietnam are building up paramilitary forces and fishing fleets to stake claims in the disputed South China Sea.

April 14, 2020: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang participates in a videoconference of ASEAN Plus 3 leaders to discuss China's medical assistance to its neighbors, closer regional coordination on public health measures, and support for a regional cooperation fund to combat the pandemic.

April 17, 2020: Malaysian officials report that *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, a Chinese government survey ship, is in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone and tagging an exploration vessel operated by Petronas, Malaysia's state oil company.

April 18, 2020: China's State Council announces the establishment of two administrative units, one on the Paracel islands and another on the Spratly islands, to manage the day-to-day affairs on the respective islands.

April 20, 2020: In a strategic move to further cement China's claims in the South China Sea, China's Natural Resources Ministry and Civil Affairs Ministry release a joint statement with names to 80 geographical features in the Paracel and Spratly islands.

